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Troublesome Problems and an Awesome Thought

WE HAVE JUST passed the midpoint of the 1980s and we have just had a presidential election. So far nothing very terrible has happened, but many might add that nothing has improved very much either. There are many troublesome problems in both medicine and society, and so far there do not seem to be any very good solutions anywhere to be found. The mood of the electorate seemed to be that as long as things are not getting any worse let's not rock the boat too much. However, the power of the liberal theories of the recent past seems to be fading, and conservative beliefs appear to be gaining some greater acceptance, with no proof that these theories will work any better than those of the liberals.

So far no social, economic or political theory or belief seems equal to the problems we face today. The Marxists do not seem to have any generally workable answer, the socialist approach has been less than satisfactory where it has been seriously tried and even this freedom-loving nation has found unfettered free enterprise to be unacceptable. While the proponents of each of these systems loudly espouse their beliefs, none of their theories seem to work well in practice, either for health care or for society as a whole. Perhaps there is something missing in all of these approaches. There may be a dimension or two that they fail to take into account.

For one thing, the full impact of burgeoning science and technology on health care and on society itself has yet to be understood and appreciated. They have already raised more

technologic, social, economic and political questions than our cultural systems have answers for. They are producing change faster than our systems can adjust and creating an unbelievably complex technologic, social, economic and political interdependence among people and between peoples with which we are ill prepared to deal. And then, it is almost universally overlooked that a common thread running through all this (whether we are talking about medicine or society) is people, people who act and respond in terms of their human nature and their human behavior, which in turn are biologic phenomena. People behave the way they do because of their genetic programming and their acquired experience. All in all it is little wonder that the abstract conceptual theories that have been dominating our social, economic and political thinking are falling so far short of what is needed.

The thread of human nature and human behavior, and thus of medicine, clearly weaves throughout the fabric of human social, economic and political affairs. The fundamentally biologic nature of human society must eventually be recognized, as indeed has been the fundamentally biologic basis of human nature and human medicine. The problems of all are adaptation to stress and to change in their internal and external environments. When the adjustments are good there is health and well-being. When the adjustments are not good there are serious human problems—that is, problems for humans.

Medicine is the one profession that is authoritative for human behavior in health and disease. It is awesome to think of the quantum leap that will be necessary if the expertise in medicine and human biology that is needed is to be developed, and then brought to bear, to help deal with the complex social, economic and political human problems that are being so rapidly created, and even compounded, by the new science and technology. It seems likely that the thread of medicine will soon be found to weave throughout the fabric of human society in ways we have never yet considered. Maybe the doctor glut is nature's way of preparing the medical profession for some new responsibilities that may lie ahead!

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